

Rabies Information

presented by *Modern Ferret* magazine

The following information was collected to help provide current, correct information regarding ferrets and rabies. This document was created on April 30, 2001. Comments in brackets [] are from Mary R. Shefferman, Editor of *Modern Ferret* magazine.

From the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) web site
(<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/default.htm>)

What happens if a neighborhood cat bites me?

You should seek medical evaluation for any animal bite. **However, rabies is uncommon in dogs, cats, and ferrets in the United States. Very few bites by these animals carry a risk of rabies** [*emphasis added*]. If the cat (or dog or ferret) appeared healthy at the time you were bitten, it can be confined by its owner for 10 days and observed. **No anti-rabies prophylaxis is needed. No person in the United States has ever contracted rabies from a dog, cat or ferret held in quarantine for 10 days** [*emphasis added*].

If a dog, cat, or ferret appeared ill at the time it bit you or becomes ill during the 10 day quarantine, it should be evaluated by a veterinarian for signs of rabies and you should seek medical advice about the need for anti-rabies prophylaxis.

The quarantine period is a precaution against the remote possibility that an animal may appear healthy, but actually be sick with rabies. To understand this statement, you have to understand a few things about the pathogenesis of rabies (the way the rabies virus affects the animal it infects). From numerous studies conducted on rabid dogs, cats, and ferrets, we know that rabies virus inoculated into a muscle travels from the site of the inoculation to the brain by moving within nerves. The animal does not appear ill during this time, which is called the incubation period and which may last for weeks to months. A bite by the animal during the incubation period does not carry a risk of rabies because the virus is not in saliva. Only late in the disease, after the virus has reached the brain and multiplied there to cause an encephalitis (or inflammation of the brain), does the virus move from the brain to the salivary glands and saliva. Also at this time, after the virus has multiplied in the brain, almost all animals begin to show the first signs of rabies. Most of these signs are obvious to even an untrained observer, but within a short period of time, usually within 3 to 5 days, the virus has caused enough damage to the brain that the animal begins to show unmistakable signs of rabies. As an added precaution, the quarantine period is lengthened to 10 days.

From the Compendium of Rabies Prevention and Control, 2001

[*Note that The National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians (NASPHV) recommends that dogs, cats, and ferrets be treated exactly the same with regard to rabies prevention and control.*]

Part III A.

3) DOMESTIC ANIMALS: Local governments should initiate and maintain effective programs to ensure vaccination of all dogs, cats, and ferrets and to remove strays and unwanted animals. Such procedures in the United States have reduced laboratory-confirmed cases of rabies in dogs from 6,949 in 1947 to 111 in 1999. Because more rabies cases are reported annually involving

cats (278 in 1999) than dogs, vaccination of cats should be required. The recommended vaccination procedures and the licensed animal vaccines are specified in Parts I and II of the Compendium.

[Note that the risk of exposure to rabies from ferrets is not even mentioned, but that cats are considered to be the most common rabies vector with regard to domesticated species.]

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Part III B.

6) MANAGEMENT OF ANIMALS THAT BITE HUMANS

a) A healthy dog, cat, or ferret that bites a person should be confined and observed daily for 10 days; administration of rabies vaccine is not recommended during the observation period. Such animals should be evaluated by a veterinarian at the first sign of illness during confinement. Any illness in the animal should be reported immediately to the local health department. If signs suggestive of rabies develop, the animal should be euthanized, its head removed, and the head shipped under refrigeration (not frozen) for examination of the brain by a qualified laboratory designated by the local or state health department. Any stray or unwanted dog, cat, or ferret that bites a person may be euthanized immediately and the head submitted as described above for rabies examination.

[Note that dogs, cats, and ferrets are to be treated the same. If dogs and cats pose an "acceptable" rabies risk and ferrets are a lower risk animal, then rabies risk is not a valid reason to ban ferrets where cats and dogs are not also banned.]

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Reference:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Human rabies prevention—United States, 1999. Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 1999;48:RR-1.

From the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) web site

In recent years, **cats have become the most common domestic animal infected with rabies** *[emphasis added]* because many cats are not vaccinated and are exposed to rabid wildlife while outside. Rabies also occurs in dogs and cattle in significant numbers. The disease has been diagnosed in horses, goats, sheep, swine, and ferrets. *[Note that rabies does not occur in ferrets in "significant numbers."]*

Improved vaccination programs and control of stray animals have been effective in preventing rabies in pets. **Approved rabies vaccines are available for cats, dogs, ferrets,** *[emphasis added]* horses, and some livestock.

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If Your Pet Has Bitten Someone

Urge the victim to see a physician immediately and to follow the physician's recommendations.

Report the bite to the local health department and animal control authorities. **If your pet is a cat, dog or ferret, the officials will confine the animal and watch it closely for 10 days** *[emphasis added]*. Home confinement may be allowed. Immediately report any illness or unusual behavior with your pet to your local health department and veterinarian. Don't let your pet stray, and don't give your pet away. The animal must be available for observation by public health authorities or a veterinarian.

[Note that the AVMA, as the CDC and the NASPHV, recommends the same procedures for dogs, cats, and ferrets.]